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Invisible Presence

The confusion of an artist in the city

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Report

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Abstract

Invisible Presence

The confusion of an artist in the city

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Cities are Critical sites. In my art practice, I stroll through a landscape. I examine the inhabitants of the land, their dreams, and the structures inhibiting those dreams. My aim is to challenge the status quo and imagine new possibilities of existence.

Invisible-presence is a series of ongoing art projects aimed at the study of societies through an artistic framework. The project focuses on the confrontations that arise between modern societies and their citizens. Cities control social interactions and behaviors, through surveillance and policies that guide, direct and impede urban planning. Structures of power dictate our direction of movement through the implementation of codes that are as visible as street signage and fences that prevent crowds from congregating. My Artwork looks at the citizens who challenge these parameters.

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Chapter 1: WHAT

Through the critical engagement of social structures such as urban planning, we can see social welfare, and safety can often be rationalized for the deployment of more extreme structures of control in contemporary society. The despotic inflictions used in urban architecture are the point of conflict that instigate uprisings within cities. Often this leads to social change and restitution of social and political rights. This act is an introduction to an analysis of urban spaces from these three points specified:

How do ‘insurgent citizens’ who are marginalized and alienated from a society based on their behavior, social class, nationality, color and so forth, form new city identities?

The emergence of ‘Non-Places’ where identity, communication, and history have no real meaning, where no attachments take place between human and space, and individuals initiate no social relationships, rather, the connection of individuals and those around them are mediated through words and texts.

What is happening to the flâneurs? How do they function and what directions are they pushed in? With the increase in traffic and the consequential containment of pedestrianization to interior spaces such as shopping malls. Flâneurs are extradited to the suburbs through specified walkways and defined green spaces. Will they eventually be moved off the face of the city entirely?



(Figure 1) A view of Vali-e Asr Intersection - Iron fences for controlling the movement of people on the street.

I always consider myself a wanderer in cities. And with every single step I take, I question urban spaces. My practice began examining Iran, the place I knew intimately and could track its changes. Its' cities have planned, imposed, and implemented some forms of despotic top-down modernization. Examples, including turning streets one-way, banks and state offices occupying residential spaces, construction of residential spaces in the suburbs, are all indicating the evacuation of people from cities. A social study of such behavior towards urban spaces will shed light on the senseless interference on both the spaces and their inhabitants.

A few years ago in Tehran, Vali-e Asr Intersection pedestrian underpass became operational. Construction of an underpass, underneath Vali-e Asr Intersection, where the most important streets in Tehran meet the city installed iron fencing, a means of saying 'Keep off!' (Figure 1). This forced people underground to keep them off the streets as part of the Urban Despotism project at the pretext of traffic control.

The crucial question for me to consider is how to document the presence of wanderers on the surface of streets in the interiorization of social life. As part of my practice, Invisible Presence: underground-operations, I placed a fixed-frame camera to record snapshots which included the fences, guide signs, charity boxes, flags, cultural and iconic buildings, and me, the artist, standing still like the rest of the elements. The passers-by, maintaining different social roles and personalities were encouraged to take a photo with me. There were students, vendors, pro-government, soldiers, young, old, and even a charity box thief (Figure 2), who had their photos taken. The significance of the story is precisely in representing the state of

oppression and domination that occurs in urban space, and resistance of Wanderers in keeping their bodies on the street. Wanderers, from a bourgeois gentleman to a street vendor are still present. They represent the manifestation of resistance in the modern city.



(Figure 2) Survivors always return back to the scene of the crime.

Another form of friction between cities and citizens is the expansion of the places in the self-constructed peripheries of which the poor build their own home. It is a form of resistance of citizens and, in principle, the main owners of the cities to take their cities back. I started a series of unplanned walks in an Auto-Constructed urban periphery. This exercise was influenced by the Situationist International (SI) movement and their Psychogeography and theory of *Dérive* (a mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society). I asked how would it be different if these Psychogeographical experiences were in places that were built up organically by their inhabitants, without governmental control making manifest modern ideologies? How can one experience wandering in these areas? How can the geography of these places affect the mind? How much does this wandering show the truth of this place?



(Figure 3) Kerman, Iran, unnamed suburban-urban periphery, auto-constructed houses

I walked to this undesignated place whose definition is somewhere in between of an Autonomous Zone, squat house and the ghetto (Figure 3). It was an unnamed suburb that used to be a farm. In this work, *Invisible Presence: an endless wandering*, the conditions of this unnamed space is important, its location is not. Cordoned off zones are part of contemporary global specialization of cities; This unnamed space can exist in any country. When I started walking on the street of the unnamed space, I experienced alienation, a feeling of separation that I felt to every person around me. This is because I was experiencing a simulacrum of modern society. In this unnamed suburb, there are no rules because there is no state to enforce them. This place is simultaneously separated from mainstream society and at the same time a part of it.

The ending point of my stroll was a “Utopian” cafe called You & Me, that mimicked what a real cafe looked like. In “You & Me”, I used my phone to record what was around me. In this video I recorded a man who remains silent while gazing off into the distance (Figure 4), The spoken audio consists of a conversation I had about the socio-political conditions of this unnamed suburb with a member of this unnamed space. This cafe is similar to that of other spaces found in modern cities but also, it wasn’t, it was a simulation of the ‘real’. It wasn’t made as a space for consumers, it was made as space for the cafe owner’s friends. In performing its “realness,” it created a separation between fact and fiction, truth, and fallacy.



(Figure 4) Invisible Presence: an endless wandering - video-installation view

Notions of formal citizenship have drastically changed especially in the context of the most recent refugee crises. Cultural divides, language difficulties, and racist attitudes are symptoms of the refugees' social alienation. These racist dilemmas are the result of host communities that use marginalized refugees as cheap labor for economic development. They are not aware of the important role that newcomers have in shaping the identity of future cities.



(Figure 5) video screenshot from Invisible Presence: We are well self-equipped

New generations of citizens born of these refugee parents will generate new cultures and modes of citizenship. The descendants of war, despair, panic, and pain will create a new optimistic or desperate vision for the future! How will the descendants of these refugees challenge the use and identity of these urban spaces?

Many walk through the streets without regard for the forms and the people we encounter. We try our best to reach our destination. As we walk through the city focused on our destination it is all too easy to overlook the structures that guide our behavior. But from time to time, some citywide moves make us get out of our minds and pay more attention to our surroundings. What's going on in the city? *Invisible Presence: We are well self-equipped* (Figure 5) is a depicts two Afghan refugee children building a weapon to hunt birds. These two children alter colorful balloons and soda bottles to make an instrument that can launch rocks. However, in practice, none of the rocks reach their target. At first glance, the video is a depiction of two boys making a failed hunting apparatus. With further inspection, one can see the parallels between the boys' construction and the process of urban construction. These children turn a ruined and marginalized neighborhood into their personal workshop. They enter the city holding their weapons in hand challenging the streets, sidewalks, parks, and people who pass through. By changing urban spaces to a scene of battle and resistance, they give a new identity to the city. By their flounders, they teach us the history of their life and tell us that the future of the city also belongs to them, to the unwanted sojourners.



(Figure 6) *Invisible Presence: Harmony* - video-installation view

But how can an artist, as a newcomer in the city, challenge city behaviors? How much does this city reveal its realities without any veil? Or it tries to limit strangers' movement to a set of predetermined spaces. My most recent work, a two-channel video/sound installation titled *Invisible Presence: Harmony* (Figure 6), focuses on the relationship between two images that have no immediate visual connection. After a few moments, connections are made through contradictions and similarities. The channels are different colors and sizes, but both share the existence of the human body as a symbol of resistance. On one channel projected on the wall, you see a video-montage of 4000 frames of photographs taken in an hour. In each frame, an old man sitting in his wheelchair is surrounded by dancing bodies.

The other channel, shown on a Sony PVM television, is a black and white video of a blind man trying to get the attention of passerby around him by tapping his cane. The rhythm of the tapping occasionally syncs up with the frame rate of the other channel. Discovering the underlying behaviors in a given society, investigating how these mechanisms link members of society and portraying this relationship is one of my key artistic concerns.

Chapter 2: HOW

My Media artworks demonstrate how social life extends beyond its own subjective limits. It challenges the binaries we continually reconstruct between Self and Other, between our own ‘cannibal’ and ‘civilized’ selves. By merging several seemingly incompatible worlds into a new universe, I make work that deals with the documentation of events and the question of how they can be presented.

My art research argue that the onset of social movements and attempts to change the moralities status quo state start from individual movements and ridiculously-superficial actions. Sometimes ideas and reactions to issues such as gentrification and socio-spatial fragmentation appear in odd forms and behaviors that in the process of normalization become a common form of social behavior. Discovering the underlying behaviors in societies, investigating their links and portraying their communications with each other has become one of my key artistic concerns. Somehow, my mind can not stop thinking about a bleeding trash can beside the entrance to a pharmacy.

Walking through the cities and anxiously searching for something. This is the birthplace of curiosity. Nothing looks normal. Glances, whispers, and chases become a heightened sensory phenomenon. Searching for evidence of global crises embedded within the mundane elements of my everyday existence. Elements that we commonly experience in a state of distraction, such as human interaction, broken infrastructure, wealth inequality and so forth, and along with these crises, how humans react within. I wander around cities, the encounter of events happening in them imbue the recording of their inflammations and truth. Collected documents used as fundamental materials for shaping a contemporary aesthetic form of video/sound aiming to play a protagonist roll in my own narrative of the truth.

My approach to media art is from a sculptural perspective I investigate the manipulation of forms through the execution of a simple instruction or action, drawing attention to the low-frequency movement. Through attaching significance to small gestures I display works across multiple channels to describe a disconnect or mirroring of worlds that reveal subtle differences and similarities between the alternate frames. In making films I observe the atmosphere of a place, a minimal aesthetic exposes space as a physical presence, a tangible volume which evolves across the slow progression of time. Within the stillness of the frame, the images are haunted by an emptiness, an atmosphere of time in which subtle actions and sounds occur, in which to discover a mystery or potential in this void.

Chapter 3: WHY

In this text, I have explored the connections between contemporary cities and citizens through the language of contemporary art. In the series of Invisible-presence project, I use visual language in the art to analyze contemporary societies. Forms and incidents emerge from the modernization of cities due to their high diversity as well as the speed of these developments become ordinaries and insensible. According to Rancière, The exclusive characteristic of the aesthetic regime of the arts is the fact that whatever is ordinary conveys a specific beauty and susceptible to becoming the subject matter of art. By studying the cities and recording what happens to them with my experiments and interventions, I document and present forms of ordinary to be sensible, knock them off track from their normalized path and giving them a value in the formation of the critical paradigms in the social sciences.

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